# Artists from the Island

## A Study of the Works by Ramprasad Bhattacharya and Mahananda Gomasta

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## DECLARATION BY THE STUDENT

I hereby declare that the work which is being presented in this dissertation entitled **"Artists from the Island: A study of the works by Ramprasad Bhattacharya and Mahananda Gomasta"** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Masters of Fine Arts in Painting** is an authentic record of my own work carried out during the period from **February 2025** to **April 2025** under the supervision of **(Dr) Sanjay Sen Gupta** Department of **Fine Arts and Design, Sister Nivedita University.**

I acknowledge that I have read and understood the UGC regulations, 2018 (*Promotion of Academic integrity and Prevention of Plagiarism in Higher Educational Institutions*).

I confirm that this dissertation has been checked for plagiarism using the plagiarism checking software **www.duplicheacker.com**. At the end of the dissertation, a copy of the summary report demonstrating similarities in content and its potential source (if any), generated online using plagiarism checking software is enclosed. I herewith confirm that the dissertation has been less than 10% similarity according to the plagiarism checking software's report and meets the UGC Regulations as well as plagiarism rules of Sister Nivedita University.

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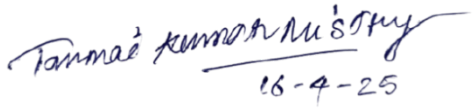


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# Content


| | | Page No. |
|---|---|---|
| | Acknowledgement | I |
| | Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter 1: | Art and Artists of Andaman: An Overview | 2-5 |
| Chapter 2: | Ramprasad Bhattacharya and His Art | 6-14 |
| Chapter 3: | MahanandaGomasta and His Art | 15-23 |
| Chapter 4: | Placing Ramprasad Bhattacharya and MahanandaGomasta in Contemporary Art in India: A Stylistic Analysis | 24-27 |
| | Conclusion | 28 |
| | List of Figures/Plates | 29-30 |
| | Photo Credit | 31-32 |
| | Select Bibliography | 33 |

# Introduction

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located in the Bay of Bengal, are celebrated for their ecological richness and cultural diversity. However, this region remains largely outside the mainstream of Indian art, which is primarily focused on metropolitan cities. Artists from such geographically isolated areas often receive little academic or institutional attention, despite their important contributions to regional and cultural expression. This research aims to bring visibility to two such underrepresented artists from the Andaman Islands -- Ramprasad Bhattacharya and Mahananda Gomasta. They are two of the most significant artistic voices from the region, whose creative practices are deeply influenced by the natural and social environment of the islands.

Both the artists received formal training in mainland India but chose to return to the Andamans to live and work. Their art reflects relationship with the landscape, local communities, and indigenous knowledge systems. Ramprasad Bhattacharya primarily works with woodcut printmaking, using this medium to depict themes of human struggle, labor, nature, and memory. His images are often layered with symbolic meaning, shaped by both personal experiences and broader social concerns. In contrast, Mahananda Gomasta is known for his sculptural practices using driftwood collected from island shores. His sculptures express indigenous identity, resilience, and the ecological challenges faced by the island communities. Both artists use materials native to the islands, embedding their work with strong place-based narratives. One of the challenges in studying these artists is the limited availability of published material or digital documentation of their work. As such, this research relies heavily on primary sources, including in-person interviews, artwork observations, and photographic documentation. My direct connection as a student of Ramprasad Bhattacharya also offered valuable insights into his artistic process and philosophy. The absence of secondary references is not a constraint but rather strength of this study, as it highlights the originality and field-based nature of the research.

This dissertation is structured across four chapters. The first chapter outlines the cultural, geographical, and artistic context of the Andaman Islands. The second and third chapters focus individually on Bhattacharya and Gomasta, analyzing their styles, themes, and mediums. The fourth chapter offers a comparative discussion, identifying common threads and differences in their practices, and reflecting on the broader significance of their work within the framework of Indian contemporary art.

By documenting and critically analyzing the work of these two artists, this dissertation contributes to the recognition of regional artistic voices and expands the understanding of how environment, identity, and place shape contemporary artistic practices in India.

# Chapter 1

# Art and Artists of Andaman: An Overview

The Andaman Islands are famous not only for their natural beauty but also for their rich cultural and artistic heritage. While traditional art forms in the region are deeply rooted in the indigenous cultures, modernist art practices have evolved over time, shaped by the settlers and the shifting social dynamics of the land.

When exploring the art of Andaman, the artistic traditions of its indigenous communities cannot be overlooked. The Great Andamanese, Onge, and Jarwa tribes have long expressed their cultural identity through art, which is deeply intertwined with their way of life and beliefs. One of the most significant indigenous art forms is body painting, particularly practiced by the Onge and Jarwa tribes. Using natural pigments, they create intricate patterns on their bodies, serving not only as an aesthetic expression but also as a symbol of social identity. During festivals and special occasions, they adorn themselves with a unique style of body painting that reflects their cultural heritage and traditions.[1]

Figure 1.1: Sketch of a Jarwa man with painted face and body, Ink on Paper

[1]Gomasta: 2025

The earliest settlers in the Andaman Islands were primarily the prisoners sent in 1858 by the British government as punishment to a penal settlement at Port Blair that was established on the same site where an earlier failed colony had existed nearly a century ago. The first batch of convicts, consisting of 773 prisoners, faced severe hardships in the initial months, of which 64 died in the hospital due to harsh conditions, disease, and lack of medical facilities. Additionally, 140 prisoners escaped and were never recaptured, presumably perishing due to starvation in the dense forests or being killed by indigenous tribes. One prisoner succumbed to the extreme conditions and committed suicide, while 87 convicts were hanged by the British Government for attempting to escape. The remaining prisoners endured severe punishments and continued to serve their sentences under strict surveillance.[2] After serving their sentences, some of them chose to return to the mainland, while others accepted the government's offer for settling permanently in the islands. However, the first organized settlements began in 1949, by bringing refugee families from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). After that settlement continued in 1950 to 1961 from different regions of India, while land was offered by the Indian Government to those migrants from Bengal, Ranchi, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, etc.[3]These agriculturists and petty tradesmen thus introduced diverse artistic and cultural traditions to the island. As settlers made the Andaman Islands their home, their practices significantly shaped the region's evolving artistic landscape. Bengali, Tamil, and Telugu settlers played a crucial role in preserving and promoting their cultural practices. For instance, Bengali settlers established the tradition of crafting Durga idols, which gradually adapted to the unique environmental and material conditions of the Andaman Islands.

The foundation of modern artistic practices in Andaman was laid with the arrival of trained art educators from mainland India. Satyan Das was among the first to introduce formal art education, playing a pivotal role in nurturing local artistic talent. Later, Niresh Poddar was appointed as an art teacher in Nicobar, where he drew inspiration from the local culture and daily life, incorporating these elements into his works. Eventually, he was transferred to Port Blair, where he actively promoted artistic development by organizing workshops, competitions, and community art programs. Some years later, Swapnesh Choudhary, further contributed to the growth of the artistic community in Andaman.[4]

These artists not only pursued their own creative endeavors but also trained students, fostering a growing artistic culture. Through this chain of mentorship and artistic exchange, a thriving community of artists gradually emerged, expanding the presence of artistic expression in Andaman.

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[2]As recorded on June 16, 1858, by Superintendent James Pattison Walker. (Historical Background of Andaman, 2025)
[3]Historical Background of Andaman, 2025
[4] Bhattacharya: 2025

Over time, several artists from Andaman have gained recognition beyond the islands. Among them, Ramprasad Bhattacharya and Mahananda Gomasta stand out for their contributions. Their works draw inspiration from the cultural and environmental essence of the islands, blending themes of nature, indigenous influences, and personal artistic expressions.

Among these artistic developments, the Andaman Islands have long been recognized for their historical significance, particularly the Cellular Jail, which stands as a symbol of both oppression and resilience. In the early twenty-first century, the Andaman administration sought to depict the hardships and punishments endured by prisoners, including freedom fighters, through artistic representation. However, the projects were commissioned to mainland artists, instead of the locals, that unfortunately produced results not up to the desired standards.[5]

Despite its artistic richness, the Andaman Islands present several challenges for artists. One of the biggest obstacles to gaining recognition is the lack of exhibition spaces and art events, making it difficult for artists to showcase their work. Additionally, the high cost of art materials, many of which must be imported from the mainland, creates financial constraints. Another major challenge is the absence of formal fine arts institutions, limiting access to structured art education and professional training.

Figure 1.2: Art Gallery & Studio at Gandhi Park in Port Blair, Andaman

For many years, aspiring artists from the Andaman Islands traveled to the mainland to pursue formal art education. Upon returning, they enriched the local artistic landscape by introducing new techniques and perspectives. Recognizing the need for a dedicated space to promote art and artists, the local artistic community actively sought support from the Andaman administration to establish an art gallery. However, the progress was slow, with initiatives repeatedly being interrupted due to various challenges.

[5]Bhattacharya: 2025

After years of persistence, their efforts were finally rewarded in 2016 with the establishment of the ‘Art Gallery & Studio’ at Gandhi Park in Port Blair. This significant step initiated a wave of exhibitions, offering emerging artists a space to display their creative expressions. However, over time, the lack of financial promotion and patronization led to a gradual decline in interest from the exhibitors. As the artworks couldn’t generate sufficient economic returns, the frequency of exhibitions decreased, eventually leading to their discontinuation.

Despite these challenges, new opportunities are emerging today to support the Andamanese artists. Social media and digital platforms are providing a space for them to showcase their work and connect with wider audiences. Growing interest in nature-inspired themes has also encouraged new forms of artistic expression. Collaborations with mainland art institutions are further enabling artists to gain exposure, access learning opportunities, and develop their professional careers.

The art and artists of the Andaman Islands are deeply shaped by nature, cultural heritage, and historical influences. From traditional tribal art to works inspired by the environment, Andaman’s art reflects a blend of cultural heritage and natural elements. While some artists directly incorporate indigenous art forms, others subtly integrate various themes from tribal life and the island’s landscape. This artistic evolution preserves the region’s identity while allowing artists to express their creativity and gain recognition beyond the islands.

# Chapter 2

# Ramprasad Bhattacharya and His Art

Ramprasad Bhattacharya spent his early childhood on Ross Island (now renamed as Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Dweep), a small island in the Andaman Islands, where his father worked. Growing up in this cozy natural ambience, surrounded by the vast sea, he developed a deep connection with the coastal landscape. He spent his days playing by the shore, fully immersed in the rhythms of island life. Later, his family moved to Port Blair (now named as Vijaypuram), the capital of the Andaman Islands, which was about 3 km from Ross Island, marking a significant shift in his life.

At that time, no Bengali-medium school existed in Port Blair, but his father was determined that he should receive an education in his mother tongue. To preserve their language and culture, Bhattacharya and other children began learning Bengali informally under the guidance of an elderly villager in an old temple. However, this informal education lacked official certification, prompting his father to enroll him in a Hindi-medium school for a year.

Ramprasad Bhattacharya

As the Bengali community in Port Blair sought to initiate formal education in their native language, a temporary Bengali-medium school was set up at local Atul Smriti (known as Bengali Club), where Bhattacharya got enrolled and continued his studies despite limited resources. When the club was no longer willing to provide space for the school, students, including Bhattacharya, studied under the trees around, an experience that reflected their resilience and determination.

Recognizing the need for a permanent school, the community came together to build one. They collected materials, raised funds, and secured land to form a team

involving the students like Bhattacharya and others to actively contribute to its construction. Thus the newly established school, named Rabindra Bangla Vidyalaya provided a stable learning environment in Port Blair. Bhattacharya formally began his education there in Class I in 1961. After years of effort, the school received government recognition ensuring future generations to have access to formal education.

Alongside his studies, Bhattacharya developed a keen interest in drawing and painting. His passion grew stronger as he participated in art competitions, receiving encouragement that further deepened his love for art. He also actively engaged in stagecraft for theatre, which enhanced his creative skills and further increased the demand for his work in various programs and festivals. During this period, his works were influenced by commercially popular art forms and reflected the essence of calendar-style paintings.

During his formal education, Bhattacharya was guided by several brilliant teachers. In Class VIII, he met a professional art teacher, Niresh Poddar, whose influence became a turning point in his artistic journey. Although much appreciated by the localites, Bhattacharya's works couldn't impress Poddar who rejected them straight away. However, instead of being discouraged, Bhattacharya took this as a motivation to refine his skills. Through continuous practice and dedication, his art improved significantly. Over time, his efforts earned Poddar's appreciation, marking a crucial phase in his development as an artist. Along with Poddar's mentorship, Bhattacharya also received guidance from artist Swapnesh Choudhary, who further contributed to his artistic growth.

After completing his higher secondary education, Bhattacharya decided to pursue formal art education. Following the advice of his teacher, he traveled to mainland West Bengal in 1974. He initially aimed to get admission to the Government College of Art & Craft in Kolkata, where Poddar had studied, but the admission process was closed before his arrival to the city. Determined to continue his studies, he then turned to Kala Bhavan of Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan and was eventually permitted to appear for the entrance test. After successfully qualifying, the Principal of Kala Bhavan advised him to come back next year for admission.

Instead of going back to Andaman, Bhattacharya chose to stay in West Bengal, dedicating his time in sketching and painting. He practiced extensively in public places and inside the Indian Museum, honing his skills and deepening his understanding of art. The following year, he had two options– either Kala Bhavan or Government College of Art and Craft. Once again, he sought the guidance of Niresh Poddar, who recommended him to join the former.

During his studies at Kala Bhavan, Bhattacharya had the opportunity to learn from several renowned artists who played a significant role in shaping his artistic vision. Among them were Somnath Hore, Sanat Kar, Lalu Prasad Shaw, Suhas Roy, and

Sarbari Roy Choudhury. Their teachings and artistic philosophies profoundly influenced Bhattacharya's approach, providing him with a strong basis in the field.

After completing his two-year foundation course, Bhattacharya chose to specialize in Printmaking (Graphics) due to financial constraints, as the department had lower costs compared to other disciplines. This decision proved to be pivotal in his artistic journey, providing him with the opportunity to explore new mediums and experiment with different techniques. Through this process, he refined his technical skills and developed a distinctive artistic language within the field of printmaking.

Figure 2.1: Laborers at work, Woodcut print, 1975

In 1975, Bhattacharya created one of his earliest woodcut prints, portraying some laborers at work (Fig. 2.1). The use of chisel and expressive stroke in this print reveals his evolving artistic sensibility. The force of each stroke conveyed the raw emotions and dynamic energy of the subjects, introducing a signature style that blended technical strength with emotional depth. His early works already reflected a deep sensitivity to human struggles and labor, themes that would recur in his later art.

At the same time, he also created another woodcut print showing two figures (Fig. 2.2), where the powerful strokes and textured lines demonstrated how he used the chisel not just as a tool, but as an extension of his inner expression.

Figure 2.2: Woodcut print of two figures, Woodcut print

Figure 2.3: Servant, Woodcut print, 1987

In 1980, Bhattacharya completed his bachelor's degree. During this time, he shifted his artistic style from abstraction to realism to gain public recognition. With the help of his friends and batch mates, he later formed a group called ‘The Realist’. The members of this group often worked on similar themes but expressed them through different compositions. One notable work by Bhattacharya from this period is a woodcut print he created in 1987, titled “Servant” (Fig. 2.3). In this composition, he depicted an artist working on a painting while a servant is shown inside a cage in the background. The artwork conveyed a strong social message. The expressive strokes and symbolic representation added depth to the narrative, reflecting his sensitivity toward social issues.

The group gradually gained recognition, starting with exhibitions in smaller venues and eventually showcasing their works in major galleries such as those in Santiniketan,

Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai, and Bardhaman. They also had the opportunity to exhibit at the prestigious Jehangir Art Gallery in Bombay (now Mumbai). In the same gallery, in 1997, Bhattacharya exhibited one of his socially sensitive paintings portraying impoverished families living by the roadside (Fig. 2.4). Based on his memories of refugee settlements in the Andaman Islands, the artwork depicted the hardships of people who lacked food, shelter, and clothing. Bhattacharya consciously chose a realistic style for this work so that common people could easily relate to and understand the subject.

Figure 2.4: Paintings of impoverished families living by the roadside, Acrylic on Canvas

Bhattacharya later moved from the relaxed life of rural Santiniketan to the hustle and bustle of Kolkata to explore further opportunities in printmaking. His growing interest in graphics led him to Rabindra Bharati University, where his friend Harekrishna Bag (a faculty member in the Graphics department) allowed him to use the intaglio press to continue his work. Thus he began to visit and explore the studio of RabindraBharati University frequently, dedicating himself to the various mediums of printmaking, especially woodcut. However, after some time, Bag advised him to formally enroll in the Graphics department by paying an admission fee of ₹140 to avoid objections from other faculty members regarding an outsider using the university's property.

Following his passion, Bhattacharya enrolled in the Graphics department, though he did not attend the scheduled classes, focusing instead in his own compositions and creative pursuits. Seeing his dedication, Bag encouraged him to be attentive about the classes and complete his Master's, motivating him to take his artistic journey more seriously.

Alongside his academic pursuits, Bhattacharya actively engaged with Kolkata's art scenario. He regularly visited exhibitions, interacted with artists, and expanded his network by connecting with many artists, art-lovers, critics and many more. Besides this, he spent time sketching in various locations across the city, including various localities,

slums, streets, and alleys. These experiences later became recurring themes in his artwork.

After completing his master's degree in 1982, Ramprasad felt the need of a stable income to support his family. Later that year, he returned to his home in Port Blair, and in 1983 began his career as an art teacher. His first posting was at a government school in Port Blair, where he taught for a year. Then he was transferred to Government Senior Secondary School in Diglipur, North Andaman. It was there that he came to know Mahananda Gomasta introduced by his primary school teacher Santiranjan Bol. It was Bol, who recognized the artistic potential in Gomasta, who by this time had completed his Class X at Kalighat School, and enrolled in Class XI in Diglipur School only.

Bol entrusted Bhattacharya with the responsibility of guiding Gomasta’s artistic growth, shaping the path of his artistic journey. But after teaching in Diglipur School for three and half years, Bhattacharya wished to explore opportunities in other locations. When the Andaman administration did not approve his transfer, he decided to return to his hometown and joined Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya in Chouldari. However, dissatisfied with the administrative management, he returned to his previous department after two years.

He was subsequently posted to Ferrargunj School in Port Blair, later transferring to Government Senior Secondary School (Telugu Medium) in Haddo. He then taught at the Government Teachers Training Institute in Port Blair, where he spent ten years of his teaching career. After that, he was transferred to Kadamtala School for one and a half years. His final posting before retirement was at Government Senior Secondary School in Neil Island (now renamed as Shaheed Dweep).

Throughout his teaching career, he actively participated in school activities, including programs and festivals. However, the structured and time-bound nature of his profession, along the administrative duties and frequent transfers, left him with little time for personal artistic pursuits. Despite his deep passion for art, the demands of his job, financial stability, and his commitment to nurturing young talents took priority over his own creative practice. As a result, his artistic output declined significantly during this period.

Still, whenever he found time, Bhattacharya continued to create, drawing inspiration from both the Andaman Islands and his earlier experiences on the mainland. His emotional bond with both regions often resurfaced in his mind, and this connection became the core of many of his works.

Figure 2.5: Island-Mainland, Silk screen print, 1997

In 1997, he created an artwork titled “Island–Mainland” using silk screen printing (Fig. 2.5), in which he depicted an artist seated at a ferry jetty, engaged in the act of creation. Around him were multiple figures, each representing different emotional states: some seated in silence, others gazing at a ship, lost in thoughts about the distant mainland. Through this work, Bhattacharya captured the essence of longing, memory, and transition. The ferry jetty became a symbolic space where his memories of the island and his aspirations tied to the mainland came together.

Figure 2.6: Untitled, Woodcut print, 1997

In the same period, he created a multi colour woodcut print showing a poor family in distress, with their home burning in flames and sorrow evident in their expressions (Fig. 2.6). Around this same time, he also made woodcut prints reflecting daily life, such as scenes of some people are resting during their lunch break (Fig. 2.7).

Figure 2.7: Lunch break, Woodcut print, 1997

Figure 2.8: Scholars on Volcanic eruption, Etching, 2001

In another significant work titled “Scholars on Volcanic eruption” created in 2001 (Fig. 2.8), Bhattacharya responded to the natural phenomena of his homeland. Inspired by Barren Island (India’s only active volcano), he created an etching print etching print depicting a scientific expedition surveying the volcanic eruption. This artwork highlighted his deep connection to the Andaman landscape and his awareness of environmental concerns.

Through these works, Bhattacharya consistently expressed empathy toward human suffering, social struggles, and environmental concerns; all while developing a strong and technically refined visual language. His preference for realism over abstraction stemmed from a desire to communicate directly with the public, particularly ordinary viewers, making his art both accessible and deeply meaningful.

# Chapter 3

# Mahananda Gomasta and His Art

Mahananda Gomasta's artistic journey was shaped by his dedication and an unwavering passion for creativity. His early life was marked by hardships, but he never allowed challenges to define him. His journey as a budding artist began in childhood when he observed his mother skillfully crafting Sora, as well as drawing and painting pictures. Inspired by her visual renderings, he developed a passion for working with clay, making dolls and other handcrafted items. This early exposure not only enhanced his skills but also deepened his creativity. The financial struggles he faced became a profound source of inspiration. His mother's ability to adapt and create with limited resources had a lasting influence on his artistic perspective. As he matured, Gomasta realized that art was not merely a means of earning a livelihood or surviving—it was a powerful medium of expression, capable of capturing emotions and the beauty of the natural world in a unique and profound way.

Mahananda Gomasta

Gomasta's journey was not without obstacles. He began school in the 1970s but had to drop out after Class II due to financial difficulties. To support himself and his family, he took up various odd jobs at a young age. However, within a few years, with the support of his teacher, Santiranjan Bol, he re-enrolled and resumed his education. He approached every task with confidence and determination, never letting hardships hinder him.

During his school years, he developed an interest in drawing after being inspired by the artworks of his teacher Nirmalendu Goldar. Through regular practice, he refined his skills, laying the foundation for his artistic pursuits. Despite having no formal training, he took on the responsibility of sculpting the idol for his school's annual Saraswati Puja,

embracing every opportunity to learn. While maturing as an artist, he expanded his practice beyond clay modeling and developed a keen interest in sculpting.

In Classes XI and XII, he studied under the guidance of renowned artist Ramprasad Bhattacharya, which further contributed to his growth as an artist. After finishing high school, Gomasta decided to continue his studies despite the financial hardships. He prepared to leave for Kolkata for further education, and his mother, despite their modest means, handed him a single rupee as a small token of her support. This simple gesture represented her faith in his abilities and the sacrifices she made to help him pursue his dreams.

With the support of his teacher, Gomasta moved to Kolkata and joined the Painting Department at Rabindra Bharati University. Despite ongoing financial struggles, he completed his bachelor's degree in painting. Although his formal training was in painting, his passion for three-dimensional modeling remained strong. Living in the university hostel, he observed students from the sculpture department working with wood and stone, further enriching his understanding of sculpture.

After completing his degree, Gomasta returned to the Andaman Islands and worked in various commercial ventures, a primary source of income in the region. In 1992, he joined the Indian Publicity and Tourism Department as an artist and designer, which provided him with opportunities to work in Delhi while continuing his artistic career. He also coordinated various art competitions and workshops organized by the Andaman administration.

While progressing in his career, he continued to refine his sculpting skills. He created three-dimensional works using wood, stone, and paper-mache, with wood carving as his primary medium. His work drew deep inspiration from indigenous Jarwa people of the Andaman Islands, capturing their traditions and profound connection to nature. He closely identified with their simplistic way of life, drawing parallels between their bonding with nature and his own upbringing in a remote village surrounded by landscapes. The hardships he faced mirrored those of the indigenous communities, further shaping his artistic expression and thematic focus.

In 2008, he sculpted an eight-foot fiberglass sculpture of a indigenous hunter (Fig. 3.1), which now stands in front of Raj Niwas, Port Blair, for which he received a commendation certificate. By 2016, he completed another monumental sculpture, a twelve-foot seated Buddha (Fig. 3.2), also installed at Raj Niwas, showcasing his ability to create large-scale works with a powerful presence.

Figure 3.1: Sculpture of a indigenous hunter, Fiber, 2008

Figure 3.2: Sculpture of seated Buddha, Fiber, 2016

In 2017, Mahananda Gomasta created a series of remarkable wood sculptures reflecting the indigenous lifestyle of the Andaman Islands. His work embodies a deep connection with indigenous communities, transforming fallen and lifeless trees into expressive sculptural forms carrying themes of identity, nature, and resilience. Instead of using

wood from living trees, he crafted his sculptures from driftwood found along the seaside and in the Bay of Bengal, as well as repurposed wood from trees felled by cyclones. While locals typically collected such wood for firewood, he saw artistic potential in these remnants of nature. Guided by emotion, he repurposed these abandoned materials into powerful visual narratives, breathing new life into them through his artistry.

Figure 3.3: A indigenous women standing in a waist-folded posture, Wood Block, 2017

Figure 3.4: Mother with her Child, Wood block, 2017

Figure 3.5: Indigenous women , Wood Block, 2017

Figure 3.6: Mother and Child, Wood Block, 2017

One of his sculptures features a indigenous woman standing in a slightly bent posture at the waist (Fig. 3.3), emerging organically from the wood as if rising from nature itself. Another wood block sculpture portrays a Mother with her Child (Fig. 3.4), and another sculpture portrays a indigenous woman carrying a basket on her head (Fig. 3.5), capturing the traditional way of life in Andaman's indigenous communities. Additionally, a mother embracing her child nestled (Fig. 3.6) within the wooden structure conveys warmth, care, and the deep-rooted bond between parent and child. In 2018, the Birla Academy of Art and Culture in Kolkata invited Gomasta to participate in their Golden Jubilee international art exhibition, where these sculptures were showcased. Recognizing the depth and significance of his work, the Birla Academy later acquired one of his sculptures for their permanent collection (Fig. 3.4), further cementing his influence to contemporary Indian art.

Figure 3.7: An indigenous figure, and another depicting a mother and child, Wood Block, 2018

In 2018, Gomasta explored the natural form of wood in his sculptures. One piece portrays an indigenous figure lying peacefully in nature (Fig. 3.7), seamlessly integrating the organic qualities of the material. Another sculpture depicts a mother carrying a basket secured by a belt on her head, with her child clinging to it, cuddling her. In these works were displayed at the National Exhibition of Contemporary Art at Shanghumukham Art Museum, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.

Figure 3.8: Mother and Child, Wood Block, 2019

Figure 3.9: A pregnant Jarwa woman resting her head on her hand, Wood block, 2019

In 2019, the Andaman administration commissioned him to create a sculpture for beautification at the newly established ‘Nature Park’ in Port Blair. The sculpture, symbolizing the bond between nature and indigenous tribes, portrayed a mother and child (Fig. 3.8), emphasizing their interconnectedness. His deep resonance with this theme stemmed from his own childhood, reinforcing his commitment to preserving cultural narratives through his work. That same year, he created a woodblock sculpture that retained the natural form of the wood, depicting a pregnant Jarwa woman resting her head on her hand (Fig. 3.9), a powerful portrayal of inner resilience and the silent strength of motherhood.

In 2023, the year of his retirement from the Indian Publicity and Tourism Department, he continued creating significant sculptures. Notable works included an indigenous child wearing a cross belt across the chest (Fig. 3.10), exhibited in the “RBU 92” group exhibition, featuring artists from his 1992 batch at Rabindra Bharati University.

Figure 3.10: An indigenous child wearing a cross belt across the chest, Wood Block

Figure 3.11: An indigenous figure merging seamlessly with a tree, Wood Block

Another sculpture depicted the face of an indigenous figure merging seamlessly with a tree (Fig. 3.11), inspired by the Jarwa. This piece was exhibited with “RBU Jorasanko Praktani,” a group formed by Rabindra Bharati University alumni from the Jorasanko campus.

In 2024, he sculpted a 4.5-foot standing figure of a Jarwa (Fig. 3.12), showcased at Chitrakala Parishath, Bangalore.

Figure 3.12: Standing figure of a Jarwa , Wood Block, 2024

Figure 3.13: Face sculptures inspired by indigenous expressions, Paper-mache

Gomasta expanded his artistic exploration into paper-mache. In 2024 he conducted a government-organized workshop in Andaman on paper-mache and painting, teaching participants to create Jarwa face sculptures and house decor items using available and without-cost materials. He demonstrated the mould-making process, enabling participants especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to produce and sell Jarwa face sculptures as souvenirs, generating income in Andaman's tourism-driven economy. Through this initiative, Gomasta extended his artistic influence beyond creation, fostering skill development and economic sustainability for aspiring artists and craftsmen.

Mahananda Gomasta's legacy continues through his dedication to art, cultural preservation, and community empowerment. His sculptures, deeply rooted in the traditions of the Andaman Islands, remain a testament to his commitment to artistic expression and environmental consciousness.

# Chapter 4

# Placing Ramprasad Bhattacharya and Mahananda Gomasta in Contemporary Art of India: A Stylistic Analysis

Contemporary Indian art includes a wide variety of styles, ideas, and voices from across the country. It is shaped by artists' personal experiences, regional backgrounds, global perspectives and cultural influences. The country's art today reflects the its rich diversity, revealing how people connect with their environment, society, and inner emotions. Artists from both major cities and remote, lesser-known areas contribute to this evolving art scene.

Within this landscape, the contributions of Ramprasad Bhattacharya and Mahananda Gomasta hold a sublime but significant position. Although they are not widely known beyond the Andaman Islands, their works carry a strong sense of place and identity. Rooted deeply in island life, their art reflects the natural surroundings, local materials, and personal memories shaped by the Andaman environment. Their styles are simple and modest, but they speak with honesty and depth, drawing attention to experiences that often remain unseen in the mainstream art world.

Through their unique voices, Bhattacharya and Gomasta add a meaningful layer to contemporary Indian art. Their works show that powerful artistic expressions can emerge from distant or overlooked regions and still contribute richly to the broader narrative.

Ramprasad Bhattacharya's style reflects a calm and reflective sensibility. His early academic training gave him a strong foundation, but his artistic journey gradually moved towards a more introspective language. Rather than presenting subjects in a literal way, he engages with the emotional atmosphere of the landscape, figure, or memory. His use of gentle tones, minimal detailing, and calm composition suggests a deep relationship with silence and spatial harmony. This poetic restraint and sensitivity to place reveal his quiet engagement with the world around him.

His artistic language draws from his early experiences in the Andaman Islands and his formal training in printmaking at Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan. Bhattacharya's works are marked by bold, expressive strokes and a strong sense of form, often reflecting human, struggle, and lived reality. His early woodcut prints, such as those portraying labourers at work, reveal a powerful use of the chisel to create textured lines and emotive force. These deliberate, rhythmic strokes convey dynamic energy and a deep empathy for his subjects.

While his early works explored abstraction, Bhattacharya later moved toward realism to connect more directly with the public. This shift did not dilute the emotional strength of his art but instead brought clarity to his narratives, focusing on themes of everyday life, social concerns, and cultural memory. His experiences of island life, resilience, displacement, community struggles, quietly inform the spirit of his compositions. Additionally, his engagement with theatre and community life further shaped his visual storytelling, enriching his works with layered human emotion and social relevance.

His stylistic choices, especially his woodcut techniques, expressive strokes, quiet colour palette, and symbolic natural motifs, reflect not just his training but a conscious response to the materials, subjects, and people around him. Unlike highly conceptual or decorative art practices, Bhattacharya's approach remains grounded and sincere. His works contribute to contemporary Indian art through a narrative of endurance and technical depth, offering a visual voice that is both regionally rooted and universally meaningful.

Beyond his art practice, Bhattacharya has played a significant role in shaping the art community of the Andaman Islands. Teaching has been his central focus, and he has mentored many young artists. Among them, Mahananda Gomasta emerged under Bhattacharya's guidance. I had the privilege of learning under his mentorship as well. His approach encourages students to reflect on their surroundings and personal experiences, thus nurturing the growth of art in the islands.

In contrast, Mahananda Gomasta works mainly with sculpture, and his unique style comes from a deep connection with his materials. He often uses wood, especially pieces collected from fallen trees or driftwood from the Bay of Bengal, making it a key part of his work. Rather than forcing his own ideas onto the material, he responds to its natural shapes, cracks, and textures, allowing them to guide the final form. His sculptures are rooted in the life and culture of the islands, indigenous figures; symbols of motherhood often appear in his work expressed with a raw emotional presence. His artistic process reflects an awareness of time, decay, and transformation, which are important themes in island life, where nature is constantly shifting.

Gomasta's approach is guided more by experience than academic convention. His deep engagement with the environment and local communities shapes the form and meaning of his sculptures. He often chooses materials like wood, stone, and paper-mache, allowing their natural qualities to lead the process. The figures he creates are grounded in the everyday lives of indigenous communities, yet they carry a powerful symbolic weight. The carved marks, solid forms, and unfinished textures retain the memory of the material's journey.

Mahananda Gomasta's sculptural language is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of island life, marked by strength, indigenous wisdom, and an intimate connection to nature. Although trained formally in painting at Rabindra Bharati University, his artistic

expression found its true voice in sculpture, particularly in wood carving, where material and emotion converge seamlessly. Working primarily with driftwood and repurposed wood from trees felled by cyclones or found along the seashore, Gomasta transformed these discarded fragments of nature into powerful sculptural forms. His practice is notable for its respectful and poetic use of material, rather than sourcing wood from living trees, he revived abandoned natural remnants, turning decay into storytelling. His sculptures reflect themes of indigenous identity, maternal care, harmony with nature, and survival.

The figures he carves, such as Jarwa women carrying baskets, mothers embracing children, pregnant women in contemplative postures, do not merely represent bodies but embody the soul of the Andaman's indigenous life. These works emerge organically from the wood, often retaining its original curves and textures, which add to the sense of figures arising from within nature itself. In doing so, Gomasta forges a unique sculptural identity that merges form with philosophy. One notable work depicts the face of a indigenous person fusing with the tree, a symbolic gesture that blurs the boundary between human and environment. Another work a indigenous figure in a cross belt, a quiet but strong presence embodying guardianship and strength. These works were showcased in important exhibitions like the Golden Jubilee of Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Academy of Fine Arts in Kolkata, Shanghumukham Art Museum in Kerala, and Chitrakala Parishath in Bangalore, earning institutional acclaim and recognition.

What distinguishes Gomasta's visual language is his commitment to cultural memory and environmental sensitivity. His sculptures do not chase stylized modernity or conceptual abstraction; instead, they speak with clarity, empathy, and regional depth. In his later works, including woodblock and paper-mache sculptures, he expanded his engagement beyond personal creation. He began training others through workshops to pass on skills and generate livelihood opportunities using accessible materials. Through this socially conscious practice, Gomasta not only preserved visual traditions of the Andaman Islands but also embedded his art in the everyday lives of people. His sculptural work contributes to contemporary Indian art through a tactile narrative of resilience, nature-based aesthetics, and cultural continuity.

His works have been exhibited in regional and national platforms, and his participation in art camps and workshops has brought attention to his practice. However, he continues to remain deeply connected to his surroundings, drawing inspiration from his immediate world. His sculptural language reflects a strong understanding of volume, surface, and space, which he uses to convey emotion and cultural memory.

In spite of differences in their mediums and approaches, both Bhattacharya and Gomasta share certain common traits. They do not seek dramatic effects or follow trends. Instead, they allow their experiences, surroundings, and cultural memories to shape their artistic languages. Both artists reflect a gentle strength, and their works

emerge from a slow, mindful connection to their environment. They do not speak from the dominant urban centers of Indian art but from a region often overlooked in mainstream narratives.

In the wider context of contemporary Indian art, their styles bring important perspectives. Bhattacharya's refined simplicity and poetic restraint stand alongside Gomasta's raw materiality and emotional strength. Together, they represent how regional voices and lived experiences can shape powerful and meaningful artistic expressions. Their practices are not fixed to one idea or medium but continue to evolve in response to their place and time.

These artists show a quiet but persistent resilience and resistance through their art. They help people remember stories that might be forgotten, give importance to voices that are often ignored, and celebrate differences instead of making everything the same. Whether through subtle brushwork or carved wood, they reclaim space for their histories, landscapes, and communities. In a world increasingly driven by speed and spectacle, their works emphasize slowness, observation, and a deep-rooted connection to place.

Their contributions highlight a growing shift in contemporary art. Personal narratives, ecological awareness, and regional histories are now gaining importance and being recognized as an important area of discourse. Thus Bhattacharya and Gomasta comes into context by offering glimpses from their island life, the quiet rhythms of time they are living through, and the profound relationship between people and nature they are surrounded with. Their practices are not only acts of self-expression but also serve as cultural documentation, preserving and reflecting the lived realities of their homeland.

The stylistic journeys of Ramprasad Bhattacharya and Mahananda Gomasta hence offer a valuable perspective within the framework of contemporary Indian art. Their works, shaped by the unique context of the Andaman Islands, expand the idea of where contemporary art can come from and what forms it can take. Through quiet observation, sensitivity to materials, and emotional depth, they contribute to a more inclusive and textured understanding of artistic practice in India. Their voices, though emerging from the edges, are deeply rooted and continue to resonate in the growing narrative of Indian contemporary art.

# Conclusion

This research explored the artistic journeys of Ramprasad Bhattacharya and Mahananda Gomasta, two significant yet under-recognized artists from the Andaman Islands. Despite being geographically distant from the mainland and the mainstream art scene, and lacking access to established art institutions, galleries, or markets in their region, both artists have developed unique artistic voices through self-driven practice and deep engagement with their local environment. Although they pursued formal education in the mainland, their decision to return and work in the Andamans speaks to their commitment to representing the region's life, culture, and struggles through art.

Ramprasad Bhattacharya's evolution from abstraction to expressive realism, particularly through his woodcut prints. His works explore themes such as labor, identity, and personal as well as collective resilience. Mahananda Gomasta's sculptural works using driftwood found along the seashores reflect indigenous identity, survival, and the spiritual relationship between people and nature. Both artists use locally sourced materials and culturally rooted imagery to voice regional concerns.

Their practices stand apart from dominant, urban-centric trends in contemporary Indian art. By foregrounding ecological themes, indigenous knowledge, and marginal narratives, their work challenges the idea that valuable artistic contributions must come from metropolitan centers. Instead, their art broadens the definition of contemporary Indian art by bringing in regional perspectives and environmental consciousness.

Though the recognition beyond the islands remains limited, but the contribution of both the artists are invaluable. They hold significance not only as art-practitioners away from the limelight of the 'contemporary' and 'Indian,' but also as mentors of many budding artists and prominent cultural representatives of the island. This study, as a whole, claims to place them within the larger context and framework of Indian art and looks forward to future research on similar unexplored avenues and their stakeholders, the underrepresented artists, whose work is shaped by their environment, culture, and lived experiences.

# List of Figures/Plates


**Page no.**

**Chapter 1**

Figure 1.1: Sketch of a Jarwa man with painted face and body, Ink on Paper 2

Figure 1.2: Art Gallery & Studio at Gandhi Park in Port Blair, Andaman 4

**Chapter 2**

Figure 2.1: Laborers at work, Woodcut print, 1975 8

Figure 2.2: Two figures, Woodcut print, 1975 9

Figure 2.3: Servant, Woodcut print, 1987 9

Figure 2.4: Paintings of impoverished families living by the roadside, Acrylic on Canvas 10

Figure 2.5: Island-Mainland, Silk screen print, 1997 12

Figure 2.6: A poor family in distress, Woodcut print, 1997 12

Figure 2.7: Lunch break, Woodcut print, 1997 13

Figure 2.8: Scholars on Volcanic eruption, Etching, 2001 13

**Chapter 3**

Figure 3.1: Sculpture of a indigenous hunter, Fiber, 2008 17

Figure 3.2: Sculpture of seated Buddha, Fiber, 2016 17

Figure 3.3: A indigenous women standing in a waist-folded posture, Wood Block, 2017 18

Figure 3.4: Mother with her child , Wood block, 2017 18

Figure 3.5: Indigenous women , Wood Block, 2017 18

Figure 3.6: Mother and Child , Wood Block, 2017 19

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Figure 3.7: | An indigenous figure, and another depicting a mother and child, Wood Block, 2018 | 19 |
| Figure 3.8: | Mother and Child, Wood Block, 2019 | 20 |
| Figure 3.9: | A pregnant Jarwa woman resting her head on her hand, Wood block, 2019 | 20 |
| Figure 3.10: | An indigenous child wearing a cross belt across the chest, Wood Block, 2023 | 21 |
| Figure 3.11: | An indigenous figure merging seamlessly with a tree, Wood Block | 21 |
| Figure 3.12: | Standing figure of a Jarwa , Wood Block, 2024 | 22 |
| Figure 3.13: | Face sculptures inspired by indigenous expressions, Paper-mache | 22 |

# Photo Credit

**Figure 1.2:** The Daily Telegrams. (Article). (2016, May 19). Art Gallery & Studio at Gandhi Park in Port Blair, Andaman (Digital image). Retrieved from https://dt.andaman.gov.in/DetailNews.aspx?newsid=Uv3VGbwoEm4b8pdEoFUooixIMBJPjtB0gSzGqW5xxtA=

**Figure 2.1:** Bhattacharya, R. (Photographer). (2024). *Laborers at work* (photograph)

**Figure 2.2:** Bhattacharya, R. (Photographer). (2024). *Two figures* (photograph)

**Figure 2.3:** Bhattacharya, R. (Photographer). (2024). *Servant* (photograph)

**Figure 2.4:** Bhattacharya, R. (Photographer). (2024). *Paintings of impoverished families living by the roadside* (photograph)

**Figure 2.5:** Bhattacharya, R. (Photographer). (2025). *Island-Mainland* (photograph)

**Figure 2.6:** Bhattacharya, R. (Photographer). (2024). *A poor family in distress* (photograph)

**Figure 2.7:** Bhattacharya, R. (Photographer). (2024). *Lunch break* (photograph)

**Figure 2.8:** Bhattacharya, R. (Photographer). (2025). *Scholars on Volcanic eruption* (photograph)

**Figure 3.1:** Gomasta, M. (Photographer). (2008). *Sculpture of a indigenous hunter* (photograph)

**Figure 3.2:** Gomasta, M. (Photographer). (2016) *Sculpture of seated Buddha* (photograph)

**Figure 3.3:** Gomasta, M. (Photographer). (2017). *A indigenous women standing in a waist-folded posture* (photograph)

**Figure 3.4:** Gomasta, M. (Photographer). (2017). *Mother with her child* (photograph)

**Figure 3.5:** Gomasta, M. (Photographer). (2017). *Indigenous women (*photograph)

**Figure 3.6:** Gomasta, M. (Photographer). (2017). *Mother and Child (*photograph)

**Figure 3.7:** Gomasta, M. (Photographer). (2019). *An indigenous figure, and another depicting a mother and child* (photograph)

**Figure 3.8:** Gomasta, M. (Photographer). (2019). *Mother and Child* (photograph)

**Figure 3.9:** Gomasta, M. (Photographer). (2022). *A pregnant Jarwa woman resting her head on her hand* (photograph)

**Figure 3.10:** Gomasta, M. (Photographer). (2024). *An indigenous child wearing a cross belt across the chest* (photograph)

**Figure 3.11:** Gomasta, M. (Photographer). (2024). *An indigenous figure merging seamlessly with a tree* (photograph)

**Figure 3.12:** Gomasta, M. (Photographer). (2024). *Standing figure of a Jarwa* (photograph)

**Figure 3.13:** Gomasta, M. (Photographer). (2024). *Face sculptures inspired by indigenous expressions* (photograph)

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Introduction

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located in the Bay of Bengal, are celebrated for their ecological richness and cultural diversity. However, this region remains largely outside the mainstream of Indian art, which is primarily focused on metropolitan cities. Artists from such geographically isolated areas often receive little academic or institutional attention, despite their important contributions to regional and cultural expression. This research aims to bring visibility to two such underrepresented artists from the Andaman Islands -- Ramprasad Bhattacharya and Mahananda Gomasta. They are two of the most significant artistic voices from the region, whose creative practices are deeply influenced by the natural and social environment of the islands.

Both the artists received formal training in mainland India but chose to return to the Andamans to live and work. Their art reflects relationship with the landscape, local communities, and indigenous knowledge systems. Ramprasad Bhattacharya primarily works with woodcut printmaking, using this medium to depict themes of human struggle, labor, nature, and memory. His images are often layered with symbolic meaning, shaped by both personal experiences and broader social concerns. In contrast, Mahananda Gomasta is known for his sculptural practices using driftwood collected from island shores. His sculptures express indigenous identity, resilience, and the ecological challenges faced by the island communities. Both artists use materials native to the islands, embedding their work with strong place-based narratives. One of the challenges in studying these artists is the limited availability of published material or digital documentation of their work. As such, this research relies heavily on primary sources, including in-person interviews, artwork observations, and photographic documentation. My direct connection as a student of Ramprasad Bhattacharya also offered valuable insights into his artistic process and philosophy. The absence of secondary references is not a constraint but rather strength of this study, as it highlights the originality and field-based nature of the research.

This dissertation is structured across four chapters. The first chapter outlines the cultural, geographical, and artistic context of the Andaman Islands. The second and third chapters focus individually on Bhattacharya and Gomasta, analyzing their styles, themes, and mediums. The fourth chapter offers a comparative discussion, identifying common threads and differences in their practices, and reflecting on the broader significance of their work within the framework of Indian contemporary art.

By documenting and critically analyzing the work of these two artists, this dissertation contributes to the recognition of regional artistic voices and expands the understanding of how environment, identity, and place shape contemporary artistic practices in India.

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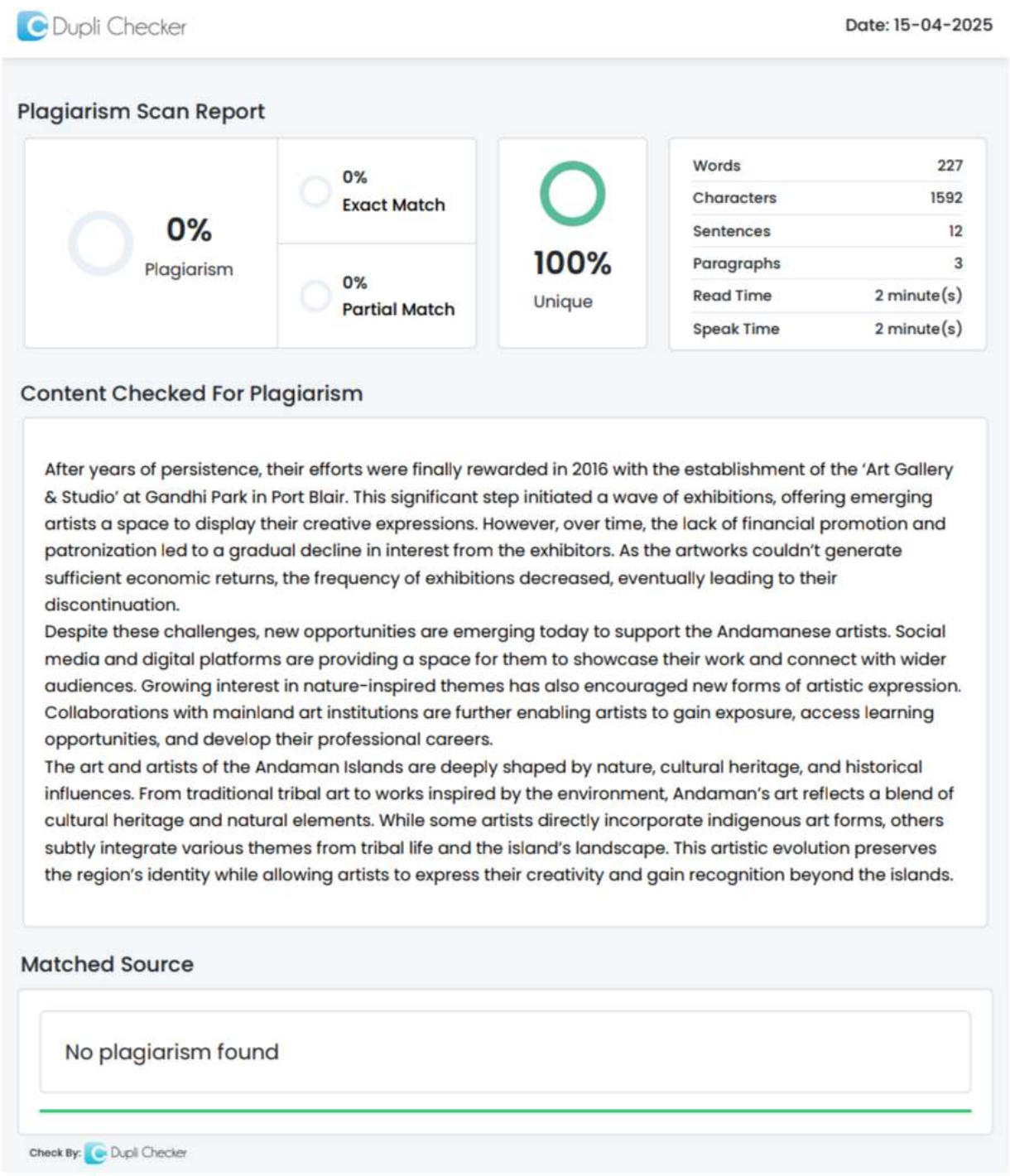
Chapter 1

Art and Artists of Andaman: An Overview

The Andaman Islands are famous not only for their natural beauty but also for their rich cultural and artistic heritage. While traditional art forms in the region are deeply rooted in the indigenous cultures, modernist art practices have evolved over time, shaped by the settlers and the shifting social dynamics of the land. When exploring the art of Andaman, the artistic traditions of its indigenous communities cannot be overlooked. The Great Andamanese, Onge, and Jarwa tribes have long expressed their cultural identity through art, which is deeply intertwined with their way of life and beliefs. One of the most significant indigenous art forms is body painting, particularly practiced by the Onge and Jarwa tribes. Using natural pigments, they create intricate patterns on their bodies, serving not only as an aesthetic expression but also as a symbol of social identity. During festivals and special occasions, they adorn themselves with a unique style of body painting that reflects their cultural heritage and traditions.

Figure 1.1: Sketch of a Jarwa man with painted face and body, Ink on Paper

The earliest settlers in the Andaman Islands were primarily the prisoners sent in 1858 by the British government as punishment to a penal settlement at Port Blair that was established on the same site where an earlier failed colony had existed nearly a century ago. The first batch of convicts, consisting of 773 prisoners, faced severe hardships in the initial months, of which 64 died in the hospital due to harsh conditions, disease, and lack of medical facilities. Additionally, 140 prisoners escaped and were never recaptured, presumably perishing due to starvation in the dense forests or being killed by indigenous tribes. One prisoner succumbed to the extreme conditions and committed suicide, while 87 convicts were hanged by the British Government for attempting to escape. The remaining prisoners endured severe punishments and continued to serve their sentences under strict surveillance. After serving their sentences, some of them chose to return to the mainland, while others accepted the government's offer for settling permanently in the islands. However, the first organized settlements began in 1949, by bringing refugee families from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). After that settlement continued in 1950 to 1961 from different regions of India, while land was offered by the Indian Government to those migrants from Bengal, Ranchi, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, etc. These agriculturists and petty tradesmen thus introduced diverse artistic and cultural traditions to the island. As settlers made the Andaman Islands their home, their practices significantly shaped the region's evolving artistic landscape. Bengali, Tamil, and Telugu settlers played a crucial role in preserving and promoting their cultural practices. For instance, Bengali settlers established the tradition of crafting Durga idols, which gradually adapted to the unique environmental and material conditions of the Andaman Islands. The foundation of modern artistic practices in Andaman was laid with the arrival of trained art educators from mainland India. Satyan Das was among the first to introduce formal art education, playing a pivotal role in nurturing local artistic talent. Later, Niresh Poddar was appointed as an art teacher in Nicobar, where he drew inspiration from the local culture and daily life, incorporating these elements into his works. Eventually,



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After years of persistence, their efforts were finally rewarded in 2016 with the establishment of the 'Art Gallery & Studio' at Gandhi Park in Port Blair. This significant step initiated a wave of exhibitions, offering emerging artists a space to display their creative expressions. However, over time, the lack of financial promotion and patronization led to a gradual decline in interest from the exhibitors. As the artworks couldn't generate sufficient economic returns, the frequency of exhibitions decreased, eventually leading to their discontinuation.

Despite these challenges, new opportunities are emerging today to support the Andamanese artists. Social media and digital platforms are providing a space for them to showcase their work and connect with wider audiences. Growing interest in nature-inspired themes has also encouraged new forms of artistic expression. Collaborations with mainland art institutions are further enabling artists to gain exposure, access learning opportunities, and develop their professional careers.

The art and artists of the Andaman Islands are deeply shaped by nature, cultural heritage, and historical influences. From traditional tribal art to works inspired by the environment, Andaman's art reflects a blend of cultural heritage and natural elements. While some artists directly incorporate indigenous art forms, others subtly integrate various themes from tribal life and the island's landscape. This artistic evolution preserves the region's identity while allowing artists to express their creativity and gain recognition beyond the islands.

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Chapter 2

Ramprasad Bhattacharya and His Art

Ramprasad Bhattacharya spent his early childhood on Ross Island (now renamed as Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Dweep), a small island in the Andaman Islands, where his father worked. Growing up in this cozy natural ambience, surrounded by the vast sea, he developed a deep connection with the coastal landscape. He spent his days playing by the shore, fully immersed in the rhythms of island life. Later, his family moved to Port Blair (now named as Vijaypuram), the capital of the Andaman Islands, which was about 3 km from Ross Island, marking a significant shift in his life.

At that time, no Bengali-medium school existed in Port Blair, but his father was determined that he should receive an education in his mother tongue. To preserve their language and culture, Bhattacharya and other children began learning Bengali informally under the guidance of an elderly villager in an old temple. However, this informal education lacked official certification, prompting his father to enroll him in a Hindi-medium school for a year.

Ramprasad Bhattacharya

As the Bengali community in Port Blair sought to initiate formal education in their native language, a temporary Bengali-medium school was set up at local Atul Smriti (known as Bengali Club), where Bhattacharya got enrolled and continued his studies despite limited resources. When the club was no longer willing to provide space for the school, students, including Bhattacharya, studied under the trees around, an experience that reflected their resilience and determination.

Recognizing the need for a permanent school, the community came together to build one. They collected materials, raised funds, and secured land to form a team

involving the students like Bhattacharya and others to actively contribute to its construction. Thus the newly established school, named Rabindra Bangla Vidyalaya provided a stable learning environment in Port Blair. Bhattacharya formally began his education there in Class I in 1961. After years of effort, the school received government recognition ensuring future generations to have access to formal education.

Alongside his studies, Bhattacharya developed a keen interest in drawing and painting. His passion grew stronger as he participated in art competitions, receiving encouragement that further deepened his love for art. He also actively engaged in stagecraft for theatre, which enhanced his creative skills and further increased the demand for his work in various programs and festivals. During this period, his works were influenced by commercially popular art forms and reflected the essence of calendar-style paintings.

During his formal education, Bhattacharya was guided by several brilliant teachers. In Class VIII, he met a professional art teacher, Niresh Poddar, whose influence became a turning point in his artistic journey. Although much appreciated by the localites, Bhattacharya's works couldn't impress Poddar who rejected them straight away. However, instead of being discouraged, Bhattacharya took this as a motivation to refine his skills. Through continuous practice and dedication, his art improved significantly. Over time, his efforts

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In 1980, Bhattacharya completed his bachelor's degree. During this time, he shifted his artistic style from abstraction to realism to gain public recognition. With the help of his friends and batch mates, he later formed a group called 'The Realist'. The members of this group often worked on similar themes but expressed them through different compositions. One notable work by Bhattacharya from this period is a woodcut print he created in 1987, titled "Servant" (Fig. 2.3). In this composition, he depicted an artist working on a painting while a servant is shown inside a cage in the background. The artwork conveyed a strong social message. The expressive strokes and symbolic representation added depth to the narrative, reflecting his sensitivity toward social issues.

The group gradually gained recognition, starting with exhibitions in smaller venues and eventually showcasing their works in major galleries such as those in Santiniketan, Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai, and Bardhaman. They also had the opportunity to exhibit at the prestigious Jehangir Art Gallery in Bombay (now Mumbai). In the same gallery, in 1997, Bhattacharya exhibited one of his socially sensitive paintings portraying impoverished families living by the roadside (Fig. 2.4). Drawing from his memories of refugee life in the Andaman Islands, the artwork portrays the struggles of individuals who endured severe deprivation, lacking basic necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing. Bhattacharya consciously chose a realistic style for this work so that common people could easily relate to and understand the subject.

Figure 2.4: Paintings of impoverished families living by the roadside, Acrylic on Canvas

Bhattacharya later moved from the relaxed life of rural Santiniketan to the hustle and bustle of Kolkata to explore further opportunities in printmaking. His growing interest in graphics led him to Rabindra Bharati University, where his friend Harekrishna Bag (a faculty member in the Graphics department) allowed him to use the intaglio press to continue his work. Thus he began to visit and explore the studio of RabindraBharati University frequently, dedicating himself to the various mediums of printmaking, especially woodcut. However, after some time, Bag advised him to formally enroll in the Graphics department by paying an admission fee of ₹140 to avoid objections from other faculty members regarding an outsider using the university's property.

Following his passion, Bhattacharya enrolled in the Graphics department, though he did not attend the scheduled classes, focusing instead in his own compositions and creative pursuits. Seeing his dedication, Bag encouraged him to be attentive about the classes and complete his Master's, motivating him to take his artistic journey more seriously.

Alongside his academic pursuits, Bhattacharya actively engaged with Kolkata's art scenario. He regularly visited exhibitions, interacted with artists, and expanded his network by connecting with many artists, art-lovers, critics and many more. Besides this, he spent time sketching in various locations across the city, including various localities, slums, streets, and alleys. These experiences later became recurring themes in his artwork.

After completing his master's degree in 1982, Ramprasad felt the need of a stable income to support his

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In 1997, he created an artwork titled "Island–Mainland" using silk screen printing (Fig. 2.5), in which he depicted an artist seated at a ferry jetty, engaged in the act of creation. Around him were multiple figures, each representing different emotional states: some seated in silence, others gazing at a ship, lost in thoughts about the distant mainland. Through this work, Bhattacharya captured the essence of longing, memory, and transition. The ferry jetty became a symbolic space where his memories of the island and his aspirations tied to the mainland came together.

Figure 2.6: Untitled, Woodcut print, 1997

In the same period, he created a multi colour woodcut print showing a poor family in distress, with their home burning in flames and sorrow evident in their expressions (Fig. 2.6). Around this same time, he also made woodcut prints reflecting daily life, such as scenes of some people are resting during their lunch break (Fig. 2.7).

Figure 2.7: Lunch break, Woodcut print, 1997

Figure 2.8: Scholars on Volcanic eruption, Etching, 2001

In another significant work titled "Scholars on Volcanic eruption" created in 2001 (Fig. 2.8), Bhattacharya responded to the natural phenomena of his homeland. Inspired by Barren Island (India's only active volcano), he created an etching print etching print depicting a scientific expedition surveying the volcanic eruption. This artwork highlighted his deep connection to the Andaman landscape and his awareness of environmental concerns.

Through these works, Bhattacharya consistently expressed empathy toward human suffering, social struggles, and environmental concerns, all while developing a strong and technically refined visual language. His preference for realism over abstraction stemmed from a desire to communicate directly with the public, particularly ordinary viewers, making his art both accessible and deeply meaningful.

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Chapter 3

Mahananda Gomasta and His Art

Mahananda Gomasta's artistic journey was shaped by his dedication and an unwavering passion for creativity. His early life was marked by hardships, but he never allowed challenges to define him. His journey as a budding artist began in childhood when he observed his mother skillfully crafting Sora, as well as drawing and painting pictures. Inspired by her visual renderings, he developed a passion for working with clay, making dolls and other handcrafted items. This early exposure not only enhanced his skills but also deepened his creativity. The financial struggles he faced became a profound source of inspiration. His mother's ability to adapt and create with limited resources had a lasting influence on his artistic perspective. As he matured, Gomasta realized that art was not merely a means of earning a livelihood or surviving—it was a powerful medium of expression, capable of capturing emotions and the beauty of the natural world in a unique and profound way.

Mahananda Gomasta

Gomasta's journey was not without obstacles. He began school in the 1970s but had to drop out after Class II due to financial difficulties. To support himself and his family, he took up various odd jobs at a young age. However, within a few years, with the support of his teacher, Santiranjan Bol, he re-enrolled and resumed his education. He approached every task with confidence and determination, never letting hardships hinder him.

During his school years, he developed an interest in drawing after being inspired by the artworks of his teacher Nirmalendu Goldar. Through regular practice, he refined his skills, laying the foundation for his artistic pursuits. Despite having no formal training, he took on the responsibility of sculpting the idol for his school's annual Saraswati Puja, embracing every opportunity to learn. While maturing as an artist, he expanded his practice beyond clay modeling and developed a keen interest in sculpting.

In Classes XI and XII, he studied under the guidance of renowned artist Ramprasad Bhattacharya, which further contributed to his growth as an artist. After finishing high school, Gomasta decided to continue his studies despite the financial hardships. He prepared to leave for Kolkata for further education, and his mother, despite their modest means, handed him a single rupee as a small token of her support. This simple gesture represented her faith in his abilities and the sacrifices she made to help him pursue his dreams.

With the support of his teacher, Gomasta moved to Kolkata and joined the Painting Department at Rabindra Bharati University. Despite ongoing financial struggles, he completed his bachelor's degree in painting. Although his formal training was in painting, his passion for three-dimensional modeling remained strong. Living in the university hostel, he observed students from the sculpture department working with wood and stone, further enriching his understanding of sculpture.

After completing his degree, Gomasta returned to the Andaman Islands and worked in various commercial ventures, a primary source of income in the region. In 1992, he joined the Indian Publicity and Tourism

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One of his sculptures features a indigenous woman standing in a slightly bent posture at the waist (Fig. 3.3), emerging organically from the wood as if rising from nature itself. Another wood block sculpture portrays a Mother with her Child (Fig. 3.4), and another sculpture portrays a indigenous woman carrying a basket on her head (Fig. 3.5), capturing the traditional way of life in Andaman's indigenous communities. Additionally, a mother embracing her child nestled (Fig. 3.6) within the wooden structure conveys warmth, care, and the deep-rooted bond between parent and child. In 2018, the Birla Academy of Art and Culture in Kolkata invited Gomasta to participate in their Golden Jubilee international art exhibition, where these sculptures were showcased. Recognizing the depth and significance of his work, the Birla Academy later acquired one of his sculptures for their permanent collection (Fig. 3.4), further cementing his influence to contemporary Indian art.

Figure 3.7: An indigenous figure, and another depicting a mother and child, Wood Block, 2018
In 2018, Gomasta explored the natural form of wood in his sculptures. One piece portrays an indigenous figure lying peacefully in nature (Fig. 3.7), seamlessly integrating the organic qualities of the material. Another sculpture depicts a mother carrying a basket secured by a belt on her head, with her child clinging to it, cuddling her. In these works were displayed at the National Exhibition of Contemporary Art at Shanghumukham Art Museum, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.

Figure 3.8: Mother and Child, Wood Block, 2019

Figure 3.9: A pregnant Jarwa woman resting her head on her hand, Wood block, 2019
In 2019, the Andaman administration commissioned him to create a sculpture for beautification at the newly established 'Nature Park' in Port Blair. The sculpture, symbolizing the bond between nature and indigenous tribes, portrayed a mother and child (Fig. 3.8), emphasizing their interconnectedness. His deep resonance with this theme stemmed from his own childhood, reinforcing his commitment to preserving cultural narratives through his work. That same year, he created a woodblock sculpture that retained the natural form of the wood, depicting a pregnant Jarwa woman resting her head on her hand (Fig. 3.9), a powerful portrayal of inner resilience and the silent strength of motherhood.
In 2023, the year of his retirement from the Indian Publicity and Tourism Department, he continued creating significant sculptures. Notable works included an indigenous child wearing a cross belt across the chest (Fig. 3.10), exhibited in the "RBU 92" group exhibition, featuring artists from his 1992 batch at Rabindra Bharati University.

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Chapter 4

Placing Ramprasad Bhattacharya and Mahananda Gomasta in Contemporary Art of India: A Stylistic Analysis

Contemporary Indian art includes a wide variety of styles, ideas, and voices from across the country. It is shaped by artists' personal experiences, regional backgrounds, global perspectives and cultural influences. The country's art today reflects the its rich diversity, revealing how people connect with their environment, society, and inner emotions. Artists from both major cities and remote, lesser-known areas contribute to this evolving art scene.

Within this landscape, the contributions of Ramprasad Bhattacharya and Mahananda Gomasta hold a sublime but significant position. Although they are not widely known beyond the Andaman Islands, their works carry a strong sense of place and identity. Rooted deeply in island life, their art reflects the natural surroundings, local materials, and personal memories shaped by the Andaman environment. Their styles are simple and modest, but they speak with honesty and depth, drawing attention to experiences that often remain unseen in the mainstream art world.

Through their unique voices, Bhattacharya and Gomasta add a meaningful layer to contemporary Indian art. Their works show that powerful artistic expressions can emerge from distant or overlooked regions and still contribute richly to the broader narrative.

Ramprasad Bhattacharya's style reflects a calm and reflective sensibility. His early academic training gave him a strong foundation, but his artistic journey gradually moved towards a more introspective language. Rather than presenting subjects in a literal way, he engages with the emotional atmosphere of the landscape, figure, or memory. His use of gentle tones, minimal detailing, and calm composition suggests a deep relationship with silence and spatial harmony. This poetic restraint and sensitivity to place reveal his quiet engagement with the world around him.

His artistic language draws from his early experiences in the Andaman Islands and his formal training in printmaking at Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan. Bhattacharya's works are marked by bold, expressive strokes and a strong sense of form, often reflecting human, struggle, and lived reality. His early woodcut prints, such as those portraying labourers at work, reveal a powerful use of the chisel to create textured lines and emotive force. These deliberate, rhythmic strokes convey dynamic energy and a deep empathy for his subjects.

While his early works explored abstraction, Bhattacharya later moved toward realism to connect more directly with the public. This shift did not dilute the emotional strength of his art but instead brought clarity to his narratives, focusing on themes of everyday life, social concerns, and cultural memory. His experiences of island life, resilience, displacement, community struggles, quietly inform the spirit of his compositions. Additionally, his engagement with theatre and community life further shaped his visual storytelling, enriching his works with layered human emotion and social relevance.

His stylistic choices, especially his woodcut techniques, expressive strokes, quiet colour palette, and symbolic natural motifs, reflect not just his training but a conscious response to the materials, subjects, and people around him. Unlike highly conceptual or decorative art practices, Bhattacharya's approach remains grounded and sincere. His works contribute to contemporary Indian art through a narrative of endurance

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The figures he carves, such as Jarwa women carrying baskets, mothers embracing children, pregnant women in contemplative postures, do not merely represent bodies but embody the soul of the Andaman's indigenous life. These works emerge organically from the wood, often retaining its original curves and textures, which add to the sense of figures arising from within nature itself. In doing so, Gomasta forges a unique sculptural identity that merges form with philosophy. One notable work depicts the face of a indigenous person fusing with the tree, a symbolic gesture that blurs the boundary between human and environment. Another work a indigenous figure in a cross belt, a quiet but strong presence embodying guardianship and strength. These works were showcased in important exhibitions like the Golden Jubilee of Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Academy of Fine Arts in Kolkata, Shanghumukham Art Museum in Kerala, and Chitrakala Parishath in Bangalore, earning institutional acclaim and recognition.

What distinguishes Gomasta's visual language is his commitment to cultural memory and environmental sensitivity. His sculptures do not chase stylized modernity or conceptual abstraction; instead, they speak with clarity, empathy, and regional depth. In his later works, including woodblock and paper-mache sculptures, he expanded his engagement beyond personal creation. He began training others through workshops to pass on skills and generate livelihood opportunities using accessible materials. Through this socially conscious practice, Gomasta not only preserved visual traditions of the Andaman Islands but also embedded his art in the everyday lives of people. His sculptural work contributes to contemporary Indian art through a tactile narrative of resilience, nature-based aesthetics, and cultural continuity.

His works have been exhibited in regional and national platforms, and his participation in art camps and workshops has brought attention to his practice. However, he continues to remain deeply connected to his surroundings, drawing inspiration from his immediate world. His sculptural language reflects a strong understanding of volume, surface, and space, which he uses to convey emotion and cultural memory.

In spite of differences in their mediums and approaches, both Bhattacharya and Gomasta share certain common traits. They do not seek dramatic effects or follow trends. Instead, they allow their experiences, surroundings, and cultural memories to shape their artistic languages. Both artists reflect a gentle strength, and their works emerge from a slow, mindful connection to their environment. They do not speak from the dominant urban centers of Indian art but from a region often overlooked in mainstream narratives.

In the wider context of contemporary Indian art, their styles bring important perspectives. Bhattacharya's refined simplicity and poetic restraint stand alongside Gomasta's raw materiality and emotional strength. Together, they represent how regional voices and lived experiences can shape powerful and meaningful artistic expressions. Their practices are not fixed to one idea or medium but continue to evolve in response to their place and time.

These artists show a quiet but persistent resilience and resistance through their art. They help people remember stories that might be forgotten, give importance to voices that are often ignored, and celebrate differences instead of making everything the same. Whether through subtle brushwork or carved wood, they reclaim space for their histories, landscapes, and communities. In a world increasingly driven by speed and spectacle, their works emphasize slowness, observation, and a deep-rooted connection to place.

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Conclusion

This research explored the artistic journeys of Ramprasad Bhattacharya and Mahananda Gomasta, two significant yet under-recognized artists from the Andaman Islands. Despite being geographically distant from the mainland and the mainstream art scene, and lacking access to established art institutions, galleries, or markets in their region, both artists have developed unique artistic voices through self-driven practice and deep engagement with their local environment. Although they pursued formal education in the mainland, their decision to return and work in the Andamans speaks to their commitment to representing the region's life, culture, and struggles through art.

Ramprasad Bhattacharya's evolution from abstraction to expressive realism, particularly through his woodcut prints. His works explore themes such as labor, identity, and personal as well as collective resilience. Mahananda Gomasta's sculptural works using driftwood found along the seashores reflect indigenous identity, survival, and the spiritual relationship between people and nature. Both artists use locally sourced materials and culturally rooted imagery to voice regional concerns.

Their practices stand apart from dominant, urban-centric trends in contemporary Indian art. By foregrounding ecological themes, indigenous knowledge, and marginal narratives, their work challenges the idea that valuable artistic contributions must come from metropolitan centers. Instead, their art broadens the definition of contemporary Indian art by bringing in regional perspectives and environmental consciousness.

Though the recognition beyond the islands remains limited, but the contribution of both the artists are invaluable. They hold significance not only as art-practitioners away from the limelight of the 'contemporary' and 'Indian,' but also as mentors of many budding artists and prominent cultural representatives of the island. This study, as a whole, claims to place them within the larger context and framework of Indian art and looks forward to future research on similar unexplored avenues and their stakeholders, the underrepresented artists, whose work is shaped by their environment, culture, and lived experiences.

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